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C O N F I D E N T I A L TBILISI 000176

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: UPDATE ON KAZBEGI/LARSI CHECKPOINT
NEGOTIATIONS WITH RUSSIA

REF: TBILISI 2280

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Kent Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Georgia's lead negotiator for the talks with Russia on opening the Kazbegi/Larsi checkpoint told us that Georgia is waiting for Russia to respond to the most recent Georgia proposal that would open the border point between Russia and Georgia in early March. The agreement would allow Georgian citizens to cross; however, they would need Russian visas which remain extremely difficult to obtain. MFA officials speculated that Russia was generally surprised about the concessions made by the Georgian side, and were uncertain as to what to do. While skeptical an agreement will be reached soon, the negotiator cited the massive investment by Russia on their border facility as a potential impetus that could contribute to an agreement. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Deputy Director for European Affairs Kakha Chitaia provided Poloff with an assessment of the current situation in Georgian/Russian negotiations on reopening the Kazbegi/Larsi checkpoint. Chitaia, who leads the Georgian negotiating team on this issue, noted in particular that the tentative agreement currently being reviewed in Moscow would allow for limited crossing by Georgian citizens. Chitaia, however, stressed that while this might sound like a significant breakthrough on paper, this was more perception than reality, as Georgians would still need valid Russian visas which were currently unobtainable for all but those with Russian families or medical emergencies. Georgia's main goal was to facilitate the crossing of Georgian citizens who live in the immediate area, but it remains to be seen if the final version of any agreement will continue to include this stipulation.

¶3. (C) Chitaia stressed that the ball was in the Russians' court, as the Georgians had sent their comments on a draft agreement (based on an earlier 1993 agreement) in early January, but had not yet heard back. Chitaia noted that he did not expect a quick response, but he was growing increasingly worried in light of the plan to open the crossing at the beginning of March, and wondered if the Russians actually were surprised at the number of concessions the Georgians had made, and did not know what to do. Chitaia stated his personal opinion that he would in no way be surprised if nothing happened in the near term, and seemed generally pessimistic about the situation.

¶4. (C) Taking his pessimism into account, he sought to balance this by describing his impressions of the Russian facility at the checkpoint. Chitaia stressed that of all the Russian border crossings he had seen, including in Kaliningrad, there was nothing like the extensive construction that had taken place at Kazbegi/Larsi. He estimated that the Russians must have spent upwards of USD 35 million on the facilities, and this gave him hope that eventually the Russians would want it to be used. (Embassy

note: The new Georgian border crossing facility was completed at Kazbegi was completed with USG assistance and formally handed over to the Georgian Government in August

2009. End note.)

BASS